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Barriers and Facilitators to the Effective Operation of RBT in Queensland

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Abstract

This paper discusses preliminary findings from a review of Random Breath Testing (RBT) in Queensland. In particular, it examines RBT operational practices within the Queensland Police Service (QPS) and their alignment with best practice features of RBT identified in the literature. The study utilised a systems-based model, extrapolated from the organisational management literature, and involved semi-structured interviews with QPS staff involved in the planning and delivery of RBT operations. The interviews confirmed QPS's commitment to RBT and support for its underlying principles, evidenced in the high testing rates currently achieved. There are, however, some key issues of concern, including: quality vs. quantity of RBT tests; confusion about the role of RBT; and the need for further education about the roles of deterrence and apprehension. The findings of the study have a number of important implications for improving the management and operation of RBT.

INTRODUCTION

While a number of factors have contributed to the reduction in alcohol-related crashes in Australia, RBT appears to be the most successful countermeasure, evidenced primarily by reductions in alcohol-related crashes and decreases in the number of drivers killed with high blood alcohol levels (see Harrison *et al.* 2003 for a review). A previous review of RBT in Queensland found that the introduction of the program was associated with an 18% reduction in alcohol-related driver fatalities (Watson, Fraine & Mitchell, 1994). In response to an apparent plateauing of alcohol-related crashes in the mid-1990s, Queensland has devoted considerably more resources to RBT. Over recent years, the QPS have been conducting the equivalent of one breath test for every licensed driver per year. This represents one of the highest rates of breath testing in Australia. Given this commitment, it is important to ensure that RBT is being conducted in a way that maximises its effect on the road toll.

The purpose of this paper is to report initial findings from a major review of RBT currently being conducted in Queensland. The overall aims of the review are to: identify best practice approaches to the operation and management of RBT, documented in the relevant international literature; assess community perceptions toward RBT and self-reported drink driving behaviour; review police operational policies and practices in relation to RBT; assess the long-term impact of RBT on alcohol-related crash trends in Queensland; and identify strategies to enhance the effectiveness of RBT in reducing alcohol-related crashes. This paper specifically reports qualitative findings emerging from the review of police operational policies and practices.

This component of the review drew on organisational management theory to explore the alignment between current QPS operational practices and best practice features of RBT. Over recent years, systems-based organisational theoretical approaches have proven especially useful in the study of public service bodies (Richardson, 1999). One such systems-based approach is known as organisational alignment. The concept relates to the extent to which the strategy, structures, and culture of an organisation operate together to facilitate organisational goals (Semler, 1997). It is assumed that greater alignment is associated with greater efficiency and that greater alignment improves the performance of all the elements of an organisation by removing barriers to operation and performance (Semler, 1997). Semler's (1999) alignment model was adopted for use in this review but was modified to more adequately represent the organisational elements of the QPS (see Figure 1). According to Semler, each element affects the next in line and the degree of agreement between elements represents the state of alignment.

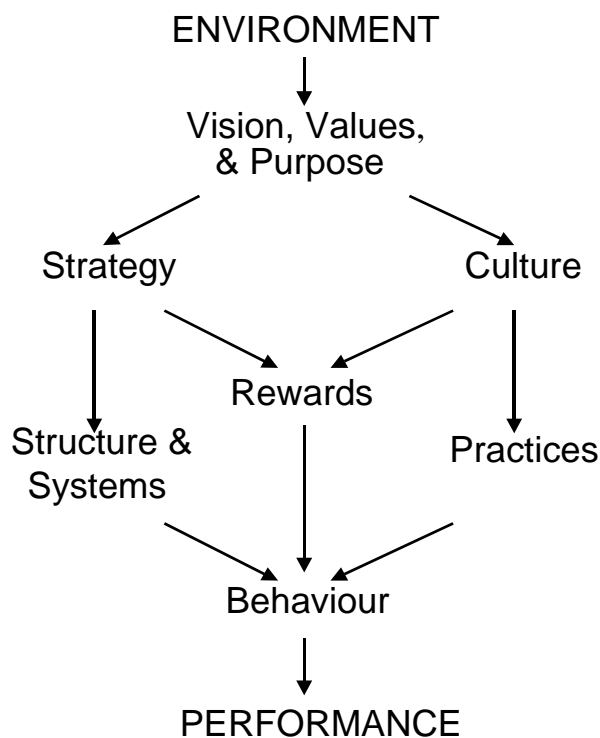


Figure 1. Modified organisational alignment model (adapted from Semler, 1999).

The above model was used to identify and organise the type of issues that were explored in the study. The specific issues/concepts that were used to operationalise each element were drawn from the RBT best practice literature. A detailed description of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. However, key best practice feature include the need for RBT to be unpredictable, unavoidable and ubiquitous through: the maintenance of sustained high levels of testing; ensuring that operations are highly visible, threatening and rigorous; ensuring that

all drivers stopped are tested; giving priority to stationary operations; educating police about the benefits of deterrence; and reinforcing RBT with publicity (Harrison *et al*, 2003; Homel, 1988. 1990; Travelsafe, 1996; Watson *et al*, 1994).

METHOD

Approval for the study was obtained from both the QUT university ethics committee and the Queensland Police Service Research Committee. Initial recruitment of participants was undertaken through the QPS's State Traffic Support Branch (STSB) who provided details of Regional Traffic Coordinators (RTC's) across the state. The RTCs were contacted and provided with a copy of the questions to be covered in the semi-structured interview. The questions were based upon constructs of the organisational alignment model shown above and on the best practice features of RBT identified in the literature. At the completion of the interviews, the RTC's were asked to provide names of senior, non-commissioned officers in charge of stations, divisions and traffic branches in their regions who could be contacted for interviews. As far as was reasonably practicable, it was endeavoured to ensure that these contacts provided a balanced mix of general duties (GD) and traffic staff and would also include smaller and/or rural stations. Overall, 22 interview sessions were conducted involving 30 QPS staff. (For practical reasons, some interviews included more than one QPS member.) The interviews were conducted in: Metro North; Metro South; Southern; South Eastern; North Coast; and Central Regions. Staff within the Northern and Far Northern Regions were unable to be interviewed prior to the preparation of this paper, but will be included in the near future.

RESULTS

While the systems-based model was used to guide the investigation, it was not intended to act as a direct test of the model. Rather, the aim was to identify issues that facilitated or act as a barrier to the effective operation of RBT. The main findings are summarised below in terms of the elements within the model.

Environment

All managers reported that the QPS's RBT policy was strongly influenced by outside agencies, particularly government committees and organisations. As a consequence, attitudes towards the Parliamentary Travelsafe Committee's recommendation (1996) of a quota of tests to licensed drivers of 1:1 were generally negative. Most managers were aware of the strong community support for RBT.

Vision/values

Generally, RBT was viewed as an important police activity, not only as a deterrent to potential drink drivers but also to ensure the detection of drink drivers. Some managers believed that the detection of drink drivers should be the primary focus of the RBT program. Although managers stated that RBT had historically proven effective in reducing the road toll, many believed that a saturation point had been reached and that it was time to re-evaluate the current situation.

Strategy

It was believed that the current QPS RBT strategy was characterised by a focus on "numbers" in an attempt to reach the recommended 1:1 ratio. It was reported in many instances, that a strong focus on the number of drivers tested has led to the practice of conducting RBT operations at low alcohol/high volume traffic times. Despite acknowledgment of the general deterrent effect of this type of enforcement, some police managers questioned its overall usefulness and cost effectiveness. This concern was

commonly raised as a quality vs. quantity issue. Some, however, believed that the quotas were achievable and helped to motivate police, while others expressed a desire to remove quotas altogether. In general, it was stated that the quotas played a role but should not be “numbers for numbers sake”. Managers wanted the freedom to be proactive with consideration for the differing needs and problems of the various regions. They also argued that the RBT strategy should be comprised of a balanced mix of mobile and stationary operations, include more targeted operations but overall, be based on a strategic use of regional and local intelligence.

Structure/systems

Data/equipment: There was a wide range of opinion about the quality and reliability of RBT data and the systems in place to monitor data collection. Some participants expressed the need for the QPS to improve the strategic use of the data to guide deployment. Overall, most managers agreed that there was enough equipment available to conduct RBT operations.

Staffing/rostering: Staffing was sometimes viewed as problematic, especially when GD staff were required to help out traffic members with larger operations. This was more evident with GD managers who pointed out that their priority was responding to calls from the public. Despite these concerns, most areas reported that they were able to meet requirements by specifying a certain amount of RBT to be conducted on a per shift basis.

Technology/training: Some managers expressed problems with accessing crash data, either due to lack of training or restricted access. Most managers reported that both traffic and GD staff required ongoing training in traffic policing, especially breath analysis courses.

Feedback: There was a general perception that more could be done to advise operational staff about the success of RBT. Some managers regarded hit rate as the best measure of success, while others focused on a reduction in the road toll. Some managers mentioned the difficulties involved in measuring the “success” of RBT, given the complexities of all the factors involved.

Vehicles: The larger booze buses were reportedly labour intensive but good for highly visible, general deterrence type operations. The smaller booze buses were favoured as they required less staff to operate and were easier to drive and use. Managers in rural areas believed that they would be served better by station wagons. There was a strong perception that different areas had different vehicle requirements and that in the case of RBT, one size did not fit all.

Intelligence: All managers expressed the need for structured intelligence systems to guide RBT deployment. The appointment of dedicated regional traffic intelligence officers was also suggested.

Culture

Some managers stated that RBT is stigmatised because it “goes against the grain of policing”. It was commented that some GD police do not see RBT as their responsibility but that of specialised traffic police. There was a common perception, particularly among nontraffic managers, that crime reduction was the primary function of policing. As a result, it was argued that traffic enforcement was, or should be, a lesser priority. Some managers stated that these assumptions were due to outdated beliefs and there was a need for ongoing education about the importance of both general and specific deterrence. Despite these concerns, several managers reported that attitudes were slowly changing and that RBT operations were being increasingly accepted as having the capacity to impact on crime. There was also a perception that senior management played an important role in fostering

this change at the regional level and that joint crime/traffic operations were more rewarding for members and assisted with breaking down barriers between specialist units, general patrols and traffic police.

Rewards

Many managers reported that there were few formal or informal rewards for conducting RBT. Informal praise was often provided for catching drink drivers, rather than conducting RBT tests. In general, most felt that there were no incentives for conducting RBT except for overtime provisions.

Practices

In order to meet quotas, it was reported that stationary operations would often be conducted at high volume traffic times. Concerns were also raised about the deskilling effect of these “blow and go” operations with members being less able to detect the indicia of impairment. In areas where regular inclusive management meetings were held, operations were likely to be more innovative, overlaying crime hot spots with RBT operations. Covert operations were not welcomed in rural areas and the issue of targeting licensed premises drew mixed responses.

Performance

Most managers spoke about performance in terms of meeting quotas, although some questioned the rationale behind this. In some areas, increases in drink driving detections were regarded as “good performance”. The ability to motivate and educate staff about the benefits of RBT was regarded as a performance indicator.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study have indicated that there is a strong commitment to RBT within the QPS, as evidenced by high level of testing currently performed. There was a general consensus that RBT is an important police activity that has strong support within the community. RBT activity is facilitated by a range of factors, including: the commitment of senior management to high levels of testing; the provision of equipment and vehicles for testing; the expectation that some RBT testing be performed by GD staff; the increasing use of intelligence to deploy RBT operations; and the increasing use of RBT to support other crime reduction strategies. However, a number of apparent barriers to the effective operation of RBT were identified.

Firstly, the issue of quality vs. quantity of RBT testing was a recurring concern raised by all managers interviewed. The general consensus was that a focus on reaching quotas could impact on the quality of RBT, leading to operations that are conducted at low alcohol/high traffic times. Such operations are also reported to deskill officers, lower morale and contribute to a traffic vs crime mentality. In areas where stationary operations are combined with criminal history, vehicle and licence checks, concerns appear to be offset. Such strategies appear to bolster morale, foster better relationships between the members involved and also provide a training ground where specialist knowledge can be shared. Whether such operations compromise the overall aims of RBT, however, is yet to be evaluated.

Secondly, there appears to be confusion about the role of RBT. Many managers felt that detection of drink drivers should be the primary goal of RBT and that the success of an operation should be judged upon the number of drink drivers detected (hit rate). Stationary operations are often viewed as a means to satisfy quotas for outside agencies and counterproductive to the goals of policing, which includes the apprehension of drink drivers.

Recognition of the importance of RBT as a preventive policing activity seems to have eroded over time. Some managers suggested that the program needs to be updated, repackaged and resold.

Thirdly, responses suggest that there is a general lack of education about the role of deterrence and apprehension in RBT operations. Only a small number of managers were aware of the complex relationship between both types of enforcement. Most believed general deterrence operations were characterised by stationary operations and detection was maximised by mobile operations with apprehension rates provided as evidence. As a result, these enforcement strategies are often viewed as separate activities. Overall, the evidence suggests that there are opportunities to improve alignment between the identified best practice features of RBT and the organisational elements explored in this study. For example, improving education about the role of deterrence may facilitate a greater appreciation of the importance of high visibility RBT operations.

CONCLUSION

The facilitators and barriers identified in this study are being further examined in other components of the review currently being conducted. In particular, it is planned to conduct a random survey of operational police utilising the same systems-based model used in this study. This will provide an insight into the extent that the facilitators and barriers discussed above impact on the performance of operational staff.

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Keywords

Random breath testing, drink driving enforcement, road safety, organisational alignment.